Public Meeting
High Speed Rail Feasibility and Planning Study
Montpelier, Vermont
February 13, 2002

A public meeting to discuss the Boston to Montreal High Speed Rail feasibility and planning study was held on February 13, 2002 at the Pavilion Auditorium, 109 State Street in Montpelier, Vermont. Members of the public attending the meeting included regional planners, legislators, transit advocates, and interested citizens. Scott Bascom of the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) was at the meeting representing his state's participation in the study. Charlie Miller, Director of Rail for VTrans, also participated in the meeting.

Prior to the formal presentation, an open house welcomed the public providing them with the opportunity to view informative displays and study materials, meet the study team, and discuss the study with team members.

The study's project manager, Ron O'Blenis of Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade & Douglas, Inc. (PB), opened the meeting welcoming those in attendance. PB is the lead firm providing planning services for the study.

Mr. O'Blenis introduced Scott Bascom, project manager for VTrans and Steering Committee representative. Mr. Bascom provided a description of the study's partnership between Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont as well as their coordination with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). He also described the financing of the study, with half of the $400,000 cost being funded by the FRA and the remaining $200,000 being paid by an equal split between the three states.

Charlie Miller was then introduced. Mr. Miller thanked the congressional staffs, Karen Songhurst of VTrans, and Scott Bascom for their work on getting the Boston/Montreal route designated by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) as a high speed rail (HSR) corridor.

Mr. O'Blenis moderated the remainder of the meeting. He began by indicating that it is important for the public to voice their opinions on the potential for high speed rail and to learn what approach the study team is taking in order to assess the viability of the Boston/Montreal route as a high speed rail corridor. He then invited participation from the audience by asking the attendees to provide their definition of "high speed rail." Responses included:

- Japan
- Acela
- Europe

- fast
- safe, convenient
- comfortable
- access to all people
- limited access
- competitive
- frequent enough
- modern

Mr. O'Blenis informed the participants that all of their answers fit the definition of high speed rail. He referenced the definition of high speed rail as shown on the study website:

> *High-speed rail (HSR) is self-guided intercity passenger ground transportation that is time-competitive with air and/or auto on a door-to-door basis for trips in the approximate range of 100 to 500 miles. This is a market-based, not a speed-based, definition: it recognizes that the opportunities and requirements for HSR differ markedly among different pairs of cities.*

Mr. O'Blenis stated that based on this definition, each of the answers provided by the public was correct.

Mr. O'Blenis then gave an overview of the study indicating that its purpose is to determine if there is sufficient demand and benefit to build a high speed rail service between Boston and Montreal, to answer the question, "Why should we do this?" Mr. O'Blenis described the methodology in the study to assess ridership. He explained that a model will be developed by Cambridge Systematics, Inc. (CS) with variables including frequency and timing of trains as well as cost. He indicated that CS will conduct surveys at bus stations, airports and the Hooksett, NH toll booths to determine existing travel patterns along the corridor. In addition to assessing potential ridership, Mr. O'Blenis said that the feasibility study will also perform an inventory of safety issues, evaluate the existing infrastructure, identify governmental issues, and develop a train performance calculation (TPC) model. Mr. O'Blenis explained that the TPC model will evaluate travel times under three scenarios and gave a brief description of the process.

One attendee asked if in-state travel was possible in a high speed rail system. This led to some discussion about the effect of the number of stations on travel time. The problem of in-state travel for people without a car was identified, especially since Vermont Transit has cut back on bus service.

Mr. O'Blenis was asked if freight would share the high speed rail track too. His response was the track would not be dedicated to high speed rail but shared with freight because

a single use track would cost too much money. Paul Craven of the Chittenden County Metropolitan Planning Organization (CCMPO) inquired how many of the ten designated HSR corridors in the United States share freight service. The answer was that they all share freight service except for a portion of the corridor in Florida that has track for passenger service only.

An attendee commented that Amtrak service operates a train with five cars, one time a day. Why couldn't the change be made to one car five times a day? Mr. O'Blenis responded that the feasibility study's ridership survey includes frequency, therefore this question will be addressed in the study.

A member of the audience posed the question regarding the level of interest by the federal government for high speed rail as compared to the commitment for the interstate highway system and the defense system. His second question wondered if high speed rail would happen in our lifetime? Mr. O'Blenis' response was that the designation indicates a level of interest, however it is not currently at as high a level as for the highway system. Charlie Miller indicated that he thought high speed rail will happen in his lifetime.

There was some discussion regarding how the present travel time between Boston and Montreal for cars and buses is approximately six hours and what would be the potential time for high speed rail? While no continuous track exists today, historical records indicate in 1926 it took about 11 hours, and in 1961 the trip could be made in approximately 8 hours.

The study team was asked to look at the potential of how high speed rail could connect people to the four main airports in the region. Mr. O'Blenis responded that it is planned to evaluate this as the planning process continues.

Peter Plumeau of Wilbur Smith Associates asked if Phase I is similar to a "fatal flaw screening?" Mr. O'Blenis responded that the answer is likely no for Phase I of the study. He then indicated that Phase II will look at the "what" question which does involve fatal flaw screening.

The study team was asked if Phase I would be considering environmental and smart growth issues? Mr. O'Blenis responded that part of the application to the FRA addresses those types of benefits.

Mike Olmstead of the New England Central Railroad questioned whether the Boston/Montreal route would be competing for funds with other corridors? Mr. O'Blenis indicated that the Federal Railroad Administration doesn't compare corridors, but rather looks at how the service would benefit the region and how it fits into the whole transportation plan.

Paul Craven asked if any other corridors were ahead of Vermont. Mr. O'Blenis responded affirmatively.

A member of the audience asked whether the line is planned to be electrified like the Acela. Mr. O'Blenis responded that the trains are not expected to be electrified

An attendee questioned whether train sets could consist of one car. Discussion then began regarding FRA's position on not approving one-car train sets. FRA has a two-car minimum due to safety concerns. It was also indicated that the United States has to build train cars fifty percent heavier than required in other countries, again to address safety issues.

Peg Franzen of the Vermont Center for Independent Living mentioned that the trains must be accessible, complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards. Mr. O'Blenis responded that compliance with ADA is an FRA requirement.

The question was asked regarding the involvement of the City of Montreal and the Province of Quebec. Mr. O'Blenis indicated that his meetings in Canada have been productive, and that the Canadians are pleased with the United States' initiative on the study. He also mentioned that the FRA requires involvement by the Canadian side.

The issue of potential government subsidy of the corridor was also discussed. A comment was made that the notion of subsidy is misleading, unless one acknowledges that highways are subsidized as well.

Luc Cote of Tranport 2000 QC mentioned that he and a colleague had driven to the Montpelier meeting from Montreal on government subsidized roads and that he supported subsidizing the high speed rail corridor.

An attendee encouraged the representatives from VTrans to encourage political and public support, include the legislature in the Steering Committee as well as key constituencies, representatives from the governor's office and staff representatives of transportation agencies.

The question was raised regarding what happens when Phase I is complete? Mr. O'Blenis indicated that another public meeting would be held in September 2002 to present the findings of the study. If justified, the study would then proceed to Phase II. Scott Bascom indicated that the FRA has stringent guidelines that must be met for the study to proceed into Phase II. However, discussions with congressional delegates are already underway to provide funding for Phase II should the conclusion of Phase I recommend further study of service for the corridor. Mr. O'Blenis emphasized that the public should understand that Phase I of the study may indicate there will not be sufficient justification to build the new high speed rail corridor.

The meeting was then closed by Mr. O'Blenis, with the invitation to continue the discussion with the team if the public had more questions and comments. Many attendees took advantage of the offer. Mr. O'Blenis also reminded those present to keep informed on the study and provide feedback to the team via the study's website, www.bostonmontrealhsr.org.

To read a more detailed summary of the other regional meetings use the links below.

- Overall Summary
- Lowell, Massachusetts
- Concord, New Hampshire
- Montpelier, Vermont